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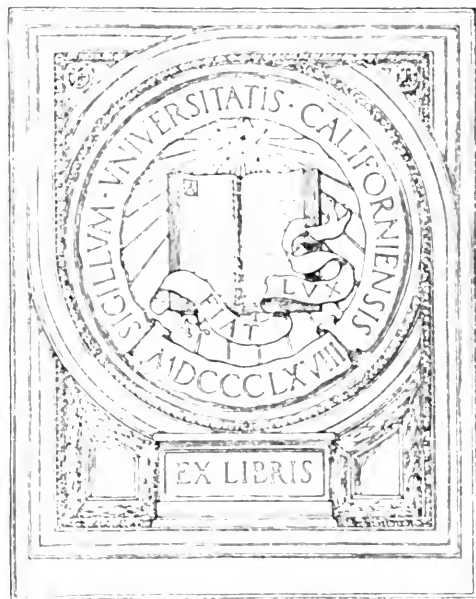


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Yale University Prize Poem

1903

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YALE UNIVERSITY PRIZE POEM

1903

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1903

LEIDENHEIM

BY

FREDERICK ERASTUS PIERCE

NEW HAVEN

THE TUTTLE, MOREHOUSE & TAYLOR COMPANY

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PREFATORY NOTE

This poem received the sixth award of the prize offered by Professor Albert Stanburrough Cook to Yale University for the best unpublished verse, the committee of award consisting of Professors Wilbur L. Cross, Francis B. Gummere, and Martin W. Sampson.

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LEIDENHEIM

The Buddhist seers believe the human soul
May pass by turns through many living creatures,
Returning here from some unearthly pole,
The same, with different features.

And some have heard a whisper low and strange
Assert a fact unproved and seldom spoken,
That each such soul through all its forms of change
Bears one unchanging token.

I know not this, and no one really knows ;
The wind blows where it will ; and mortals hear it,
But know not whence it comes or whither goes ;
E'en so the living spirit.

But thoughts like these came o'er my mind of late
In some old university of learning,
While reading dusty scrolls of ancient date
By night-lamps faintly burning—

A monkish legend, of whose deeds remote
Its writer knew but fragments, vaguely tracing
A doubtful tale; and much of what he wrote
Time's hands have been effacing.

And such a hidden meaning lurks within
Sometimes, I know not if he told his story
Of men and women who had really been,
Or meant some allegory.

A certain man of sunny France, before
His twentieth year, had wed a lovely woman,
Named Virginie d'Espoir; and loved her more
Than aught divine or human.

And, far as we can know, she must have been
Adorable indeed; that hoary hermit
Calls her an angel in a world of sin,
And all his facts confirm it.

The sweetest, gladdest, bravest, merriest she,
That e'er, these robes of mortal weakness wearing,
Brought heavenly strength to earth, and dealt it free
Around with hand unsparing.

Perhaps she was not simple clay ; for all
His pictures of her beauty so surpassing
Unconsciously in oddest phrases fall,
 As if strange visions glassing.

He said her voice had power that none could write
Or tell ; and one much mutilated chapter
Mentions a kind of haze of golden light
 That seemingly enwrapped her.

But most of all with strange, persistent power
One thing that monkish mind for ever haunted,
A crimson birthmark, like a lotus flower,
 Adown her neck that slanted.

Perhaps it gave the last persuasive touch
Of tenderness, or may have framed demurely
A happy face ; perhaps it meant so much
 Of mystery—but surely

Her husband loved that mark, the monk avers ;
And she, who laughed to find it so alluring,
Would say it was the only thing of hers
 That would remain enduring.

They built their cottage, he and she, amid
The fairest vales of France, by lawn and orchard,
And all sweet flowers that e'er their leaves undid
At light, or Nature nurtured.

And there beside their well-stones' mossy curb,
Amid the buds that their own hands had planted,
When evening's dew came down on tree and herb,
Sweet songs their voices chanted—

So sweet, so glad, the peasant, from a boy
Crushed down by years of toil that gave no guerdon,
Rose up erect in healthy manhood's joy,
Like one who drops a burden.

You would have thought to hear that agèd monk
Grow full of fire and rapturous in the telling,
That never cloud had come or shadow sunk
Above that happy dwelling.

And sunshine spread around its walls; for, where
Its mistress passed, her very touch was healing;
And kindly deeds she brought and cheerful prayer
'Neath every peasant's ceiling.

But soon that cheery voice was heard no more
By men ; and those who came and waited for her
Soon found no other guest should ope her door
 Except the Shapeless Horror.

All facts of her disease are strange and vague ;
We only know the Shade drew ever nigher,
Though mighty doctors came from Rome and Prague,
 And love knelt praying by her.

But on the night she died, her servants said,
When midnight oped the upper worlds and nether,
Her husband standing by her dying bed,
 They softly spoke together.

And then she told him how she longed to live,
With all the warmth that rich young natures cherish—
So much of happiness she had to give,
 So young she was to perish.

And now she felt on Death's descending stair,
Though passing down from heaven's life-breathing æther,
That love was stronger than the spectre there ;
 And all the tombs beneath her,

Whose reeking vapors round her rose, could not
For ever hold a soul where love had risen;
But that her passionate wealth of quivering thought
Should lighten from its prison;

And surely as the evening star that set
Should rise again to light some far-off morrow,
So surely she among the living yet
Should come to cheer his sorrow;

And would he wait for her till Heaven willed,
Their book of life, now closed a moment merely,
Should be reopened, and its pages filled
With all they loved so dearly.

So, sobbing loud, he called on God and men
To witness him his solemn promise giving,
That he would wait for weal or woe till then,
If God would keep him living.

And then he clasped her chilly hand in his;
And naught was there except the torches flaring
Their livid light o'er death—whate'er it is—
And over life's despairing.

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Just here the manuscript has many gaps,
And later writer's comment, blind and blurring;
But it would seem some twenty years perhaps
Went by with naught occurring.

Those memories—sweetest things that ever were,
Though sad are some, and some like gnawing cancers
Consume the soul. 'Which one was his of her?'
We ask, and no one answers.

Perhaps whene'er the evening's setting star
O'er lonely forests cast its glory brightly
Above the tomb of Virginie d'Espoir,
He watched beside it nightly.

Perhaps whene'er the mystic morning shed
Its light abroad, in heaven reinstating
That selfsame star, he lifted up his head
And whispered, 'I am waiting.'

All men who e'er have watched a cherished grave
May form their own beliefs and give their reasons;
But there is nothing in the parchment, save
The passage of the seasons.

Then comes a broken, much confused account
Of wars that rose, but all so marred and blended,
None know what wars they were, or whence the fount
Of strife, or who contended.

But in those wars, from morbidness of heart
Perhaps, or country's cause, the monk says quaintly,
'Ye knight did act a verie manlie part
For his dedde ladye saintlie.'

And 'twould appear they took him captive there
In some wild battle in a hemlock forest ;
And spared his life with toil, as thou wouldst spare
A friend with whom thou warrest.

Perchance he was a man of consequence
Or noble kin ; and there is mention later
Of life exposed in some brave foe's defense,
When friends had played the traitor.

Howe'er it be, he was entreated fair,
As one they honored, though a captive holden ;
And sent to castle Leidenheim, somewhere
Amid the forests olden.

Then follows a most strange description of
That home of ancient lords and legends sombre,
With dreary peaks of mountains reared above
In everlasting slumber ;

And league on league of gloomy woods below,
With darkling pools the sun had never stricken,
And rocks and giant trees of long ago,
Whence moss and fungi quicken.

A mighty Gothic pile the castle was,
Tremendous to behold ; no fortress finer
Was ever reared by Sultan's wealth or Shah's
In lavish Asia Minor.

But stern and sombre was its every line,
Like some proud soul that checks a grief forbidden ;
And sickly brown was every spreading vine
By which its walls were hidden.

And when our captive knight beheld it first,
He felt a chill o'er all his senses creeping ;
It seemed some Titan god that Heaven had cursed,
Amid his deserts sleeping.

Was it the fancy of a mind unmanned
By sense of sorrow and of bondage, coming
To be a captive in a foreign land,
Or truth's deliberate summing,

That some intangible and dusky cloud
For ever hung above it, wall and turret;
And wavered gently, like a spectral shroud,
Whene'er the wind did stir it?

And was it sickly dream or solemn fact,
That round that sullen building, towered and moated,
An odor faint and odd, whose presence slacked
The heart, for ever floated?

Who knows? Disease's morbid mists can turn
The fairest sights to spectral forms; but many
Another man has said those ramparts stern
Presented sights uncanny.

They gave him stately rooms and spacious, filled
With furniture of Eastern style, that traders
Had brought from far, or spoils of Moslems killed
By swords of old crusaders.

And all the walls were hung with hangings rich,
With brodered stuffs of weird and heathen pattern,
Portraying one-eyed Odin and the witch,
Or Jove dethroning Saturn.

There now began a mournful time for him
Of dull captivity and moments dreary,
Amid the shadows of those turrets grim
And voices low and eerie.

Sometimes he watched for hours the landscape wild,
Untamed since earliest time by human culture ;
Or eyed above the peaks, grotesquely piled,
Some solitary vulture.

Sometimes his eye perused the castle lands,
Whereon no flowers or pleasant plants were growing,
And where no orchards dropped from kindly hands
The fruits of God's bestowing ;

But avenues of gloomy cypress shed
Their shade o'er scanty turf and leaves decaying,
And moaned and sobbed like voices of the dead
When midnight set them swaying.

And oft he scanned those mighty battlements
And frowning bastions, thinking o'er the story
Of that proud race whose life had issued thence
And filled those towers with glory.

An ancient race they were, as well he knew,
The feudal lords of many generations,
A race to force their king to yield their due,
Or treat with foreign nations.

But death had passed o'er many a haughty brow,
And thinned their house and left their places lonely;
Of all that race of bearded barons now
Remained one maiden only,

The last of all her line, which creeping time
Was blotting out, a line so mighty lately,
The lady Adelaide of Leidenheim,
A slight young girl and stately.

But still the souls of all those warriors stern
Seemed haunting yet their halls of former splendor,
As if a word could make their life return,
As Samuel's did at Endor.

Their presence weighed upon the captive's mind,
And rankled in his heart like arrows barbèd ;
For day by day his manly strength declined,
And he grew weak and morbid.

Sometimes he saw the lady Adelaide
Among the walks around the gray old castle,
Or holding conference beneath their shade
With messenger or vassal ;

And glimpses of her form he caught as well
At times adown the long and dusky hallways ;
And fair she seemed—but 'twas too far to tell—
And sweet and mournful always.

Her eyes, he thought, were dark, and dark her hair ;
And, though her voice he scarcely heard for distance,
Yet echoes memory-haunting whispered there
With soft and strange insistence.

But most of all, as something ne'er before
Beheld by him, and fraught with wondering guesses,
He noticed that peculiar way she wore
Her wealth of raven tresses.

For, held by pins of pearl and golden thread,
Dark locks, across her forehead folding ever,
Hid half her brow, and round behind her head
 Went rolling like a river.

And with a sick man's humors, which increase
The smallest thing, and make a whim a passion,
He wondered if 'twere but a maid's caprice,
 Or were her country's fashion.

For never, whether down the forest track,
Or 'mid her halls, or stately riding townward,
Had he beheld those dusky locks combed back,
 But always curving downward.

Meanwhile in loneliness and gloom increased
His mental malady; and ever stranger,
Unearthly influences that never ceased
 Seemed girdling him with danger.

It may have been his failing health that filled
His world with phantoms; but there seems no question
He thought a scent from all the walls distilled
 Of subtle, dread suggestion.

And everie manne who coulde a buckler beare
Did passe to battle when ye hornes did summone;
And for two dayes they lefte nobodie there,
Save sicklie manne or woman.'

But whence the summons, what this sudden task,
And why they left no single armed retainer,
Not even one behind, 'tis vain to ask,
To try to answer vainer.

Enough—they went; and who shall now describe
The captive's thoughts within his empty prison,
With no one there but menials he could bribe
Before the moon had risen—

Save Adelaide, that gentle, watchful foe,
And incorruptible, taking not nor giving;
For surely she would never let him go,
Unless—no longer living.

Sweat burst upon his forehead at the thought—
At deeds which leave a man no honor longer;
And long and wild his struggling conscience fought,
But dark despair was stronger.

Once in his room—one cup of poison wine—
And freedom, health, and hope, all wide creation!—
Oh! neither human will nor word divine
 Could conquer such temptation.

All day he paced his room, whose moldered oak
And mortar old with horror filled his nostrils,
For ever in his ear the raven's croak
 And crying, and the kestrel's.

But when the sun was low, with haggard face
He sent a maid to give her mistress greeting;
And since he now had been within this place
 So long without a meeting,

He did entreat the lady Leidenheim,
If ever kindness gentle knights had done her,
To sup that day with him at evening time,
 To do her captive honor.

And gracious was the lady's kind assent,
However strange the knight's request; and whether
'Twere fate I know not, but, when day was spent,
 At dark they supped together

Within that long and lofty room of his,
All spread beneath with Eastern rugs and cushions,
With blazing torches round and tapestries
Of half-forgotten fashions.

And through the loop-holes near their eyes could mark
—For 'twas a night of thunderstorm—unturning,
The mighty oceanic depths of dark,
With far-off lightnings burning.

The air had freshened with the storm; and, thinned,
It filled the lungs with pureness, heart with hoping;
But still 'twas weird; along the walls the wind
Went by like fingers groping.

From ancient vaults, wherein they lay inurned
In moldering mortal pomp, no more resplendent,
'Tis possible those former lords returned
Around their last descendant.

Or else from worlds of darkness, where the worm
Can never die, and fires are never covered,
Lost souls, some hint, though none do so affirm,
Round their new brother hovered.

But whatsoever beings walked the gloom
Of night without, or lurked in niches shady,
Was no one seen within the lighted room
 Except the knight and lady.

In stately robes was she arrayed that night,
And all as fashions at the court had bidden,
Save that, as usual, half her forehead white
 Beneath her hair was hidden.

Her words were courteous and her movements grace,
Her features like a sculptor's carved perfection;
He had not dreamed the beauty of her face
 So great at close inspection.

But evermore he felt a haunting sense
Of something known—yet *what* his mind evaded;
'Twas not in gesture, face, or dress—then whence?—
 And yet it never faded.

And often as she spoke, her hearer threw
His utmost soul into his ears; for ever
He seemed as listening to a voice he knew,
 And yet could name it never.

Her air was courtly, but her feelings came
In proud humility and nothing hiding,
The dignity that suits a highborn dame,
And yet a girl's confiding—

And sudden bursts of lofty feeling, such
As youthful hearts have ever felt, affection
And high ideals, whose talismanic touch
Achieves the soul's erection.

Still, as he heard, the sense of mighty wrong
Within him grew to kill so fair a being,
E'en though for twice ten thousand ages long
Thereby his person freeing.

Nor ruth and conscience worked alone; but some
Forbidding thought arose from memory's mazes,
Which to express his very mind was dumb,
Much more articulate phrases.

Askance he eyed the goblet on the board
Before her, where the wine was gleaming redly,
Placed there before her coming, ready poured,
Which held the poison deadly.

An Eastern drug it was, whence none could live,
A drowsy, painless, very slow nepenthe
Of Egypt's life-sick doctors old, to give
Them rest in dim Amenthe.

Now came the great resolve to tell her all
His ghastly woes and all his dark endeavor ;
Then—so he left the lady living—fall
What might on him for ever.

But sudden palsy came upon his will,
Ev'n as he stirred and started to bespeak her ;
And while he hesitated, speechless, still,
She drained the fatal beaker.

Thereat a mighty shuddering shook his frame,
So strong she noticed it and asked the reason ;
For through the room no chilly vapors came,
And 'twas the summer season.

Cold perspiration starting on his face,
With chattering teeth and sentence disconnected
He said he scarcely knew, that gloomy place
Had long his mind affected.

But someway he had felt as if the souls
Of all her buried sires stood round him frowning;
And it had choked him, as when ocean rolls
Above a seaman drowning.

And was there aught in all the world more dread
Than such avenging ghosts from tombs decaying,
Shorn of all human sympathy, and dead
To pain or fear or praying?

'Oh no,' said she, 'the living we may dread,
For proud they are and often savage-hearted,
By passions wild and coarse temptations led;
But not the souls departed.

Tenants of time no more, eternal truth
Has touched the heart of every stern commander,
And taught them tenderness and Christly ruth,
And deeper thoughts and grander.

And is my grim old grandsire here, I trust
And reverence his chastened spirit better
Than when he wore the weaknesses of dust
And clay's corroding fetter.

Is it not so with thee? Hast thou no soul
In that dim world, no earthly body bearing,
Which loved thee once in life and seems thy whole
Existence ever sharing?

‘Alas!’ he said, ‘her dwelling none may guess,
With life or death; and I but bear my burden
In hope that some day all my loneliness
May find its living guerdon.’

And breaking down, he told his story then,
Their love, their parting, and that deep persuasion
That he should find his living bride again
On some far-off occasion.

The tear-drops glistened in the lady’s eyes;
‘Then fear not thou,’ she said with hope confiding
And gentle courage, ‘yea, thy dead shall rise
To be thy joy abiding.’

But wilt thou tell me—if I make my prayer
For naught too painful, since so well thou provedst
Thy knightly faithfulness—was she so fair,
This lady whom thou lovedst?

'Oh fair she was,' he said, 'not land nor sea
Nor night nor day nor all the realms of vision
Can ever show me aught so fair as she,
Nor all the lands Elysian.

Her smile was light, her face was hope and love,
Methought all heaven opened at her singing;
Oh she was sweeter than the saints above,
With loved ones round her clinging.

That perfect face—God made no other such—
One blemish only—who could help but love her?—
And that one beauty more for me, so much
It seemed a portion of her.

Last artful touch of love, this very hour
I see it here within my mind implanted,
A crimson birthmark, like a lotus flower,
Adown her neck that slanted.

And somehow, though no proof is mine, the thought
Has ever lingered in my heart unspoken,
That when she cometh, I should know her not,
Unless she bore that token.

A dream perhaps, but on these deserts dry
Of life, when reason wavers undecided,
God shapes a thought sometimes, not telling why,
And gives us that for guiding.'

He ceased; as he had spoken that lady's eyes
Grew deep as night and wild with awe and wonder;
Her face turned pale, and suddenly surprise
Had pushed her lips asunder.

Some leaping question in her look, her breath
Suppressed with fear, she sat and stared before her;
But, even as she gazed, the drug of death
Began its action o'er her.

Her startled eyes grew dim, as if she dreamed;
Their question faded like a dying ember;
She pressed her hand upon her brow, and seemed
As trying to remember.

Then with the instincts of a courteous guest,
Who feared to wound him by attention straying—
'Woe's me,' she said, with faint attempt at jest,
'My thoughts have gone a-Maying,

My will was better than my deeds avouch;
Be angry not.' Alas! he felt no anger,
And she sank softly back upon the couch
 In dreamy, painless languor.

And there, with all things fair around, beneath,
With which a sculptor might have longed to group her,
He watched her spirit slowly pass to death
 Through that benumbing stupor.

But, just as came the end, the tempest took
Such added terrors on of crashing thunder
As made the turrets rock and reel, and shook
 The deep foundations under.

The lights were all blown out; the mighty beams
Of all the castle-walls seemed wrenched and creaking,
And through the dark, like horrors heard in dreams,
 The spectral storm went shrieking.

Awe seized the captive's soul; his blood congealed;
And through his heart the icy fear was driven,
As if amid that voice of thunder pealed
 The wrath of angry Heaven.

Slowly his strength came back, as streams exude
To light from some abhorred, tremendous canyon;
With trembling hand the torches he renewed,
And looked at his companion.

Her head had settled backward as she lay;
And from that brow, whence never love's caresses
Or hand of hate had brushed the locks away,
Her wealth of raven tresses

Had fallen back; and streamed, a dusky shower,
Behind; and showed her slayer, pale and panting,
A crimson birthmark, like a lotus flower,
Adown her forehead slanting.

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